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District Accountability & Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment Minutes 02/28/2011

Approved

Arlington School Committee

District Accountability & Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment Subcommittee Meeting Minutes

Monday, February 28, 2011 @ 5:00 p.m.

Attendance

Subcommittee Members: Jeff Thielman, Kirsi Allison-Ampe, M.D. (Joseph Curran - absent)

District Leadership: Kathleen Bodie, Ed.D. (Superintendent), Mark Ryder (Director of Special Education), Lori Villani (Assistant Special Education Director), Steven Orloff (Assistant Special Education Director), Timothy Ruggere (Principal, Ottoson Middle School)

SEPAC Representatives: Michael Levi, Debra Rose Brillati, Jerri Newman, and Tony Vogel

State Representative Sean Garballey

The meeting was called to order at 5:05 p.m.

- Michael Levi opened the meeting with a statement from SEPAC (Special Education Parent Advisory Council) expressing concern about the Special Education environment at the Ottoson Middle School. The statement said that "several parents have removed their children from the school . . . [because of] Arlington's unwillingness to provide either appropriate programs and services in district or appropriate out-of-district placements." Mr. Levi went on to say that in "reviewing the report, we found that many of these issues [identified in the 2007 Walker Report] persist, and many of the recommendations in the report have not been implemented or have only been partially implemented." Mr. Levi made six recommendations to the subcommittee:
 - The School Committee should establish a system-wide standing special education committee ("SPED Committee") to oversee and supervise the delivery of special education services for the district.
 - The SPED Committee should ensure that the administration establish an ongoing process of program planning and review, utilizing design teams.
 - All special education programs will have clearly defined missions, available as public documents that include entry and exit criteria for the programs.
 - Programs should establish benchmarks for students on IEP's with respect to their performance, outcomes and grading.
 - A rigorous professional development program is needed for staff at all levels in both the special and general education areas to ensure consistent and appropriate delivery of services defined in the special education programs.
 - Inclusion is a basic civil rights issue and must not be treated otherwise. Inclusion should be considered a high priority for the district and concrete results demonstrating successful development of inclusive programming should be required.
- Mr. Ryder reviewed the Special Education Department's responses to the 24 recommendations in the 2007 Walker Report. He indicated that most recommendations have been implemented and added that the middle school is much different than it was in 2007. "In the past few years, supported learning center strands have been developed, eligibility regulations have been more adhered to, our rate of compliance has improved, and the numbers of dispute resolution proceedings have decreased."

Recommendation five in the Walker Report called for a “thorough review of research-based practices that are applicable to the various special education instructional and support programs that are currently in operation at the middle school.” Design Teams were established in 2008 and 2009. Mr. Ryder explained that while regular review of the District’s special education programs is important, “design teams and other advisory committees have proved very difficult to generate or maintain.” He explained that diminished resources (i.e., personnel) made the coordination of design teams difficult. Instead, the district has “contracted with various professional experts to work with administration and staff on how to align our programs with best practices and industry standards. Additionally, building and department administrators meet regularly to review and assess the performance of all existing programs and services.”

The 2007 Report called for a unified statement on inclusion, and there is currently one design team working on the inclusion statement. The Special Education administration stated that the district has taken an inclusive approach to professional development by providing training to general and special education teachers as well as Teaching Assistants.

- The SEPAC parents present said the district has made some progress since the Walker Report was issued in 2007, but they said the district, and the Ottoson in particular, must make more improvements. Specific concerns included:
 - Tony Vogel said that many SEPAC members feel their children received better special education services in the elementary level than they did at Ottoson. He said the Ottoson can be an unfriendly place to a child in a special education situation.
 - Parents stated that the district does not always respectfully consider the evaluations of outside consultants.
 - Mr. Levi said that 75% of parents surveyed are satisfied with special education services, while 25% of those surveyed are not. Mr. Ryder pointed out that 20% of Special Education parents answered the survey.
 - Mr. Levi stated that SEPAC wants more detailed program descriptions. Mr. Ryder said that program descriptions are sent to SEPAC each year and can be found on the SEPAC website: <http://www.arlington.k12.ma.us/sepac/programs0.php>.
- Representative Garballey made the following suggestions: a) the School Committee should endorse efforts to increase funding for the Special Education Circuit Breaker, which would make more revenue available to Arlington, and b) the School Committee should consider bringing in an outside consultant to evaluate Special Education programs in Arlington. Mr. Ryder urged the committee to wait to consider an outside consultant until the Coordinated Program Review from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is complete. Mr. Ryder expects to receive the report by the end of March.
- Mr. Thielman noted that the School Committee asked the subcommittee to make recommendations concerning the regular review and oversight of the District’s Special Education offerings. Mr. Ryder agreed to come back in two weeks with recommendations on a process that the School Committee could use. Some comments:
 - Dr. Bodie suggested that the department could give an annual or biannual report on Special Education programs.
 - Mr. Thielman suggested that the review might be a statement on the progress the Special Education Department is making on its goals, with a frank assessment of achievements as well as areas where more improvement is needed. He said the reporting process should be designed to give a straightforward self-assessment of strengths and areas where improvement is needed.
 - Dr. Allison-Ampi questioned whether this was enough, indicating that the process designed must permit Special Education parents the opportunity to share their sentiments on the program.
 - Michael Levi agreed to work with Mr. Ryder on a process to review Special Education programming.
- The committee agreed to meet on Monday, March 14th at 5:00 p.m. to receive a recommendation from Mr. Ryder on how best the School Committee can provide “regular review and oversight” of the Special Education Program.
- Dr. Allison-Ampi stated that she wanted to make changes to the January 24, 2011 minutes. A vote on the minutes, therefore, did not

take place.

The meeting adjourned at 6:40 p.m.